



Ships of mercy have long played a major role in American conflicts

Almost as long as there have been wars fought on or near waters there have been vessels assigned to care for and move casualties.

Ancient history tells how the Romans in their exploits used special boats to remove the sick and wounded. The United States, as did other countries with Navies, also found a use for such ships.

During the piracy problems with Tripoli in 1803 and 1804, Commodore Preble designated the captured ketch *Intrepid* as a ship with hospital duties. The *Intrepid* is better known, however, as the ship that sneaked under the eyes of the enemy and blew up the *Philadelphia* held captive by the Tripolitans.

The threat of yellow fever in 1859, an epidemic brought on by seamen returning from foreign ports, instigated the first floating hospital in America. The infected sailors were turned away by the marine hospital and it was necessary to find a place to treat them. A New York physician, Dr. William Adison, recently returned from England where he had studied in the floating hospital ship *Caledonian*, suggested a similar vessel.

When his idea was accepted, the port authorities voted funds to purchase

the steamer *Falcon*. The engines were removed, the deck housed over, other necessary facilities installed, and various changes made. Fittingly enough, the name was changed to the *Florence Nightingale*, and a number of patients were cared for aboard her.

During the Civil War, a captured side-wheel steamer named the *Red Rover* by its Confederate owner proved to be the US Navy's first hospital ship. This was used originally as living quarters of the men manning the Confederate States' Floating Battery *New Orleans*. The *Red Rover* caught a piece of shell when the *New Orleans* was bombarded by the Western Gunboat Flotilla. The shell pierced her top and slanted through all her decks to the bottom. Although she leaked considerably, the ship was in no danger of sinking. She was captured by the Union gunboat *Mound City* and almost immediately prepared as a floating hospital for the casualties of the North.

Not long after her capture the *Red Rover* became a haven for many injured men and officers of the apprehending gunboat.

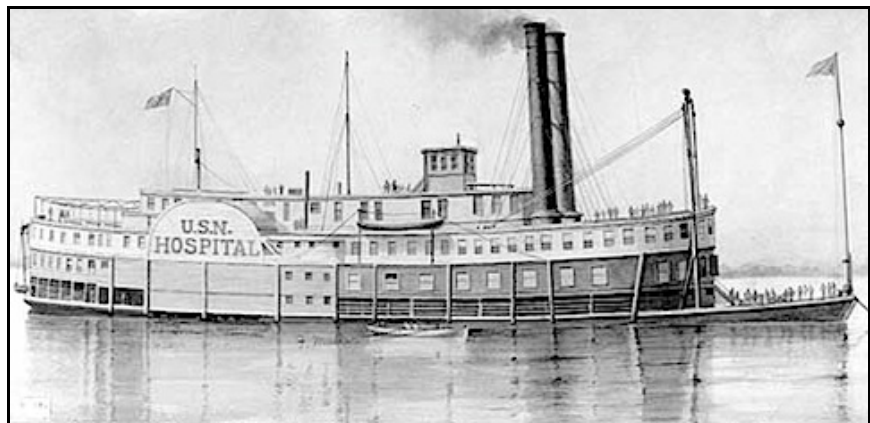
In the summer of 1862, the ship was renovated by the Army Quartermaster Corps to include laundries, bathroom facilities, elevators to transfer patients from lower to upper decks, operating rooms, nine water closets,

separate kitchens for crew and patients, and gauze blinds to keep out smoke and cinders from the convalescents' berth deck.

Enough stores were taken aboard for a crew and 200 patients for three months. This included 300-tons of ice. Commander Capt. Alexander M. Pennock reported to his Flag officer, "The boat is supplied with everything necessary for the restoration to health for the disabled seamen."

On 11 June 1862, she received her first patient, a seaman from the gunboat *Benton*, a victim of cholera.

At this time the *Red Rover* was really "half Army and half Navy," and it was only after the Illinois Prize Board sold her to the Navy that she could be called a Navy hospital ship. The reorganization and transfer of the Western



***Red Rover* was the first hospital ship of the United States Navy. Originally a commercial side-wheel steamer, she was put into military use by the Confederacy and captured by Union Forces. Her exact dimensions are unknown. The ship displaced 786-tons and drew 8-ft of water. The *Red Rover* consumed 37-1/2 buckets of coal per hour to maintain a maximum upstream speed of 9-kts.**

Flotilla to the Navy helped to solidify this fact. She was commissioned in the navy the day after Christmas, 1862.

The first vessel designated as a Naval hospital ship had a crew of twelve officers and 35 men, exclusive of the 30 surgeons and nurses aboard.

Not all of the nurses aboard were male. Four sisters of the Order of the Holy Cross came aboard that Christmas eve and were joined later by several other sisters and some black female nurses. Unknowingly, this small group proved to be the pioneers of a Navy Nurse Corps which would be organized some 50-yrs later.

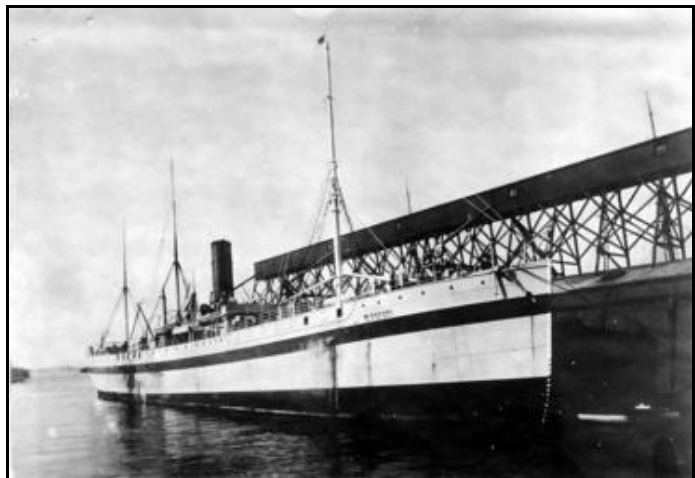
Not only was this fledgling hospital ship kept busy with her patients, but she was also pressed into service as a store ship carrying medical supplies, ice, and provisions to the ships of the river fleet.

With the establishment of a Naval hospital at Memphis, the Red Rover was relieved of some of her duties. As the war between the states drew to a close, so did the need for the Red Rover and she was removed from service 17 November 1865. Later, stripped of her only gun and iron plate, she was sold at public auction.

Hospital ships are children of necessity, mothered and fathered by wars. The United States War with Spain near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century found several liners and cargo ships converted for use as floating hospitals. Two of these remained in Naval service after this war, or at least their names were retained.

Two Army hospital ships, the *Missouri* and the *Olivette*, are worthy of mention because of their deeds. The freighter *Missouri*, a steel ship of 320-ft with a 41-ft beam, was under the British flag. She was a ship of humanitarian service long before she was converted and commissioned for hospital usage. On her second voyage, in a severe storm, she answered a distress signal of the *Denmark* out of Copenhagen bound for New York with a crew of 170 and 665 passengers nearly all immigrants to a new land. The *Missouri's* captain attempted to tow the disabled vessel but found it impossible because of the ice. The Danish ship finally signaled, "Am sinking; take off my people."

With accommodations for only 20 extra people, Capt. Murrell of the *Missouri* jettisoned his cargo to make space for the rescued passengers. First



**The *Missouri* Army hospital ship**



the babies, 22 of them, were brought aboard by lifeboat in the raging, icy seas. The little girls were next; one delayed the lifeboat by running back aboard the sinking *Denmark* to retrieve a loved one - a forgotten rag doll. Then the women; one was pregnant and gave birth to a daughter named Atlanta Missouri Linne before she set foot in her new homeland. The husbands and sons followed; and in the last boat, the officers of the doomed ship.



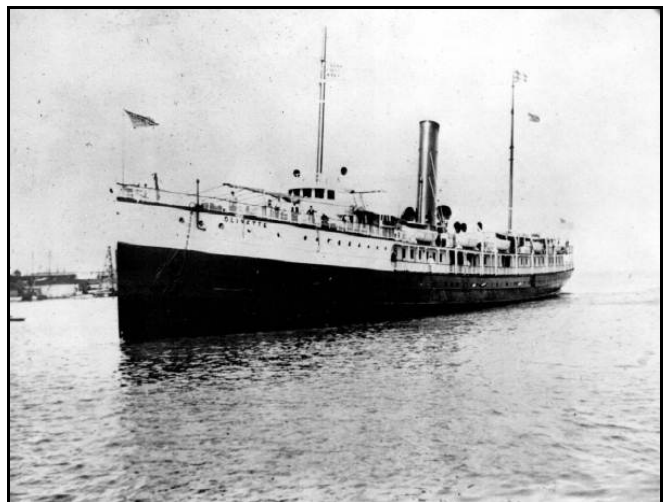
An artist of the National Academy depicted the deed on canvas titled appropriately, "And Every Soul Was Saved." (LEFT)

As if this heroic deed was not enough, the Missouri continued on her errands of mercy by carrying cargoes of flour and corn to the starving Russians during the famines of 1891 and 1892. Later, she rescued the steamship Delaware and towed her to Halifax. She also towed the foundering *Bertha* to Barry, England.

The *Missouri* was offered to the Surgeon General of the Army by her owner B.M. Baker of Baltimore for use in the Spanish-American conflict.

She was readily accepted. When the British colors were hauled down, the officers who were mostly British, applied for American citizenship and the Stars and Stripes were raised.

Following the example of Mr. Baker, patriotic societies such as the Red Cross, Daughters of the American Revolution, Colonial Dames, and Women's National Relief Association, donated such items as refrigeration plants, steam laundries, motor launches, etc. All these, plus the stocking of the library with 10,000 books and magazines by Wall Street capitalists, made the Missouri even more effective as a floating hospital.



**The Steamer Olivette**

Although without the public glamor of her earlier benevolence's, the Missouri continued her life saving efforts as a hospital ship during the war with Spain.

The *Olivette* (as viewed above) was also a transformed steamer. It served with early landings in Cuba. At the end of the skirmish, she received Adm. Cervera, Commandant of the Spanish fleet with many of his officers and men. Some of them were severely wounded and were taken from his flagship, the *Maria Theresa*.

Realizing the success of the *Red Rover* as a floating hospital, the US Navy made more extensive use of hospital ships in this war with Spain.

The *Solace* was purchased from Cromwell Steam Ship Lines where she had been in service to the West Indies as the SS *Creole*. Through accelerated wartime effort of the shipyards and a donation from the Red Cross committee, the ship was converted for hospital duties in 16 days. After her Navy war service, she was pressed into Army transport work, sailing between the West Coast and the Philippines.

In 1909, a great amount of superstructure was added to carry an antenna. With only 44-ft beam and 377-ft length, she rolled excessively.

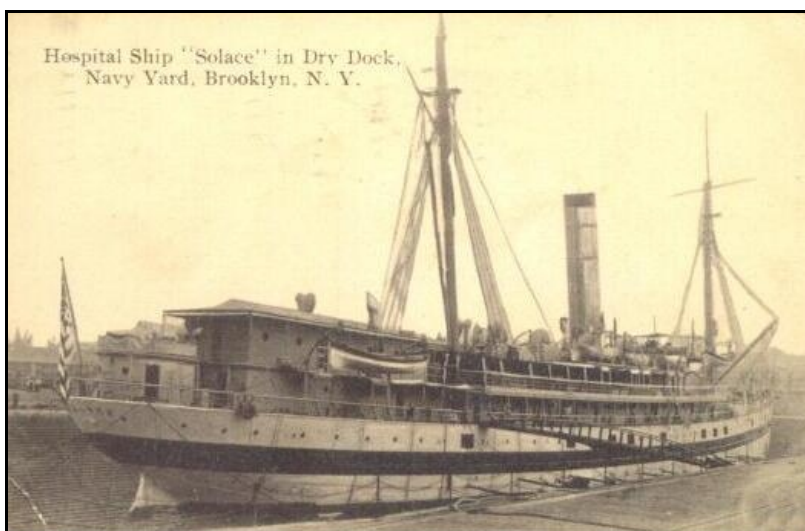
Sometime between 1912 and 1914 her height was lowered and, it was rumored, some 200 Civil War cannon were embedded in concrete to counteract the roll. This story, repeated in wardroom and forecabin throughout the fleet, made a hospital ship "the most heavily gunned in the Navy."

After service in World War I, the *Solace* was decommissioned.

To heighten the confusion over names of hospital ships, there have been five ships named *Relief* and but two of them have been used as sea-going hospitals. Of the other three, one was a stores ship, one a wooden patrol boat, and the other as a salvage tugboat. It is only with the second and fifth *Reliefs* that we are concerned.

The second *Relief* was originally a passenger cargo steamer named the John Englis and was purchased by the Army for hospital purposes in 1898.

She served in the Pacific and returned the heroic casualties of the Philippine fighting to San Francisco. She made several stops, including

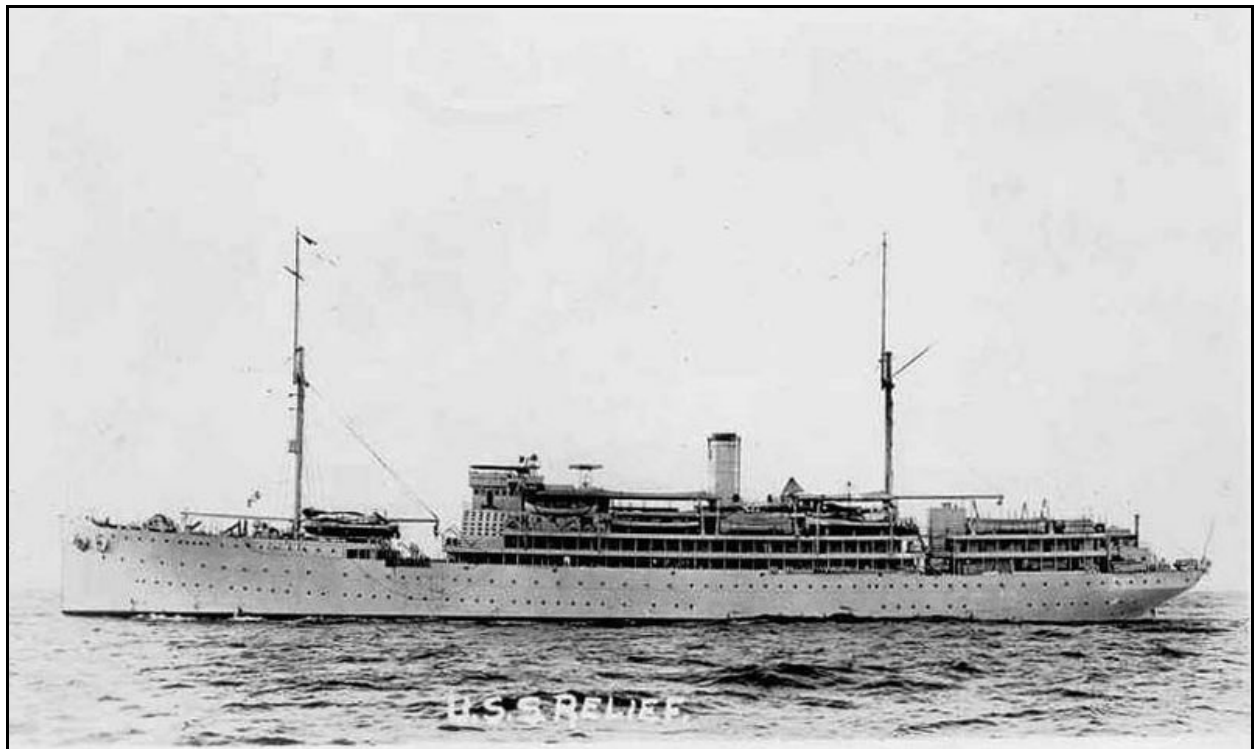


**Hospital Ship *Solace***

Honolulu, to show off her patients to a grateful and cheering public.

After the war, she was transferred to the Navy and at Mare Island was refitted as a Naval Hospital ship. Her commissioning was delayed in an intra-service squabble over the command - whether a line or medical officer would be in charge.

Pointing out that with a combatant line officer in charge, the ship would not be subject to immunity from enemy attack, the Navy Department put the ship in



the command of the medical department. A sailing master and a civilian crew were in charge of sailing the vessel.

This rule was altered in 1916 when a Congressional Act allowed deck and engineering duties to be in the hands of the Naval Reserve Force. The ship remained in the command of a medical officer.

In 1921, another change of rules came about when a reserve deck officer refused to sign a noon position, claiming it was not in his realm of duty to do so when commanded by a medical officer. Regulations were changed giving the position of command back to the line officer.

The *Relief* became part of Theodore Roosevelt's "Great White Fleet" of 16 battleships. She met the fleet on its diplomatic around-the-world cruise in Magdalena Bay, Mexico, and relieved the ships of their 152 ailing accumulated since the departure from Hampton Roads.

After debarking her patients in San Francisco, she followed the Fleet up the West Coast where she helped to stem an invasion of scarlet fever aboard the

USS *Nebraska*.

Again in Honolulu, she received diphtheria patients from the same battleship. All in all, the medical crew on the *Relief* received some fine post-graduate training as she followed the fleet to Australia.

She was detached from the Fleet in the Philippines, but on return to the States she was disabled by a Pacific typhoon and forced to return to the islands. Found unseaworthy, she became a floating dispensary at Alongapo and her name was changed to the *Repose*. *Relief* was then available as a name for another hospital ship. The end of the *Repose* came in May 1919.

The next *Relief*, assigned and built strictly as a hospital ship, was the most modern and best equipped ship of this kind in the world. She and a complement

of 44 officers and 331 enlisted corpsmen. She could handle 500 patients and contained all of the conveniences of a shore hospital including specialists for any branch of medical service. Serving the fleet in both oceans, she was in Norfolk, Virginia, when the United States was bombed into World



**The second *Solace* (AH-5)**

War II.

At the time of the bombing, the second *Solace* (AH-5) was the only hospital ship operating in the Pacific. Originally the SS *Iroquois*, she was converted in 1927 for hospital service. She was anchored at Pearl Harbor when at 0800, this bright and calm Sunday morning was shattered by Japanese bombers. By 0825, the first patients began to arrive and this hospital ship was virtually at war.

Until she was joined by the *Relief* from her North Atlantic duties, by the *Comfort* and also the *Tranquility*, the *Solace*, known as the "Great White Ship," carried on alone doing an efficient and noteworthy job servicing the fleet at such bloody places as the Coral Sea, Guadalcanal, and Iwo Jima.

The last major operation at Okinawa brought into enemy action the suicidal kamikaze attacks. Even the well-lighted and weapon-powerless hospital ships were not immune to the treacherous divers. The *Comfort* was attacked and damaged, forcing the *Solace* and other hospital ships to blackout and do their rescue work in perilous waters.



Hospitals afloat, as medical technology ashore, have come a long way. In 1908, the first Navy Nurse Corps was formed, although it was not until 1918 that they were permitted to fulfill their duties aboard ships and finally on troop transports. It was 1920 before nurses served aboard the *Relief*.

Many of the old tars and salts, so long able to look after themselves in their male world of the sea, opposed such radical innovations as women aboard ship. Replacement of the loblolly boys - so called because of the thick gruel called "loblolly" which was served to the sick and wounded by boys on ship - with nurses and well-trained enlisted corpsmen gained acceptance slowly. The men in the fleet room grew to have great faith in the men and women of the hospital ships and new methods were accepted as a part of progress just as disinfectants replaced vinegar as a germ killer and rum and laudanum were replaced by anesthetics.

## INTO THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

Today, the US Navy's Military Sealift Command operates two hospital ships, the USNS *Mercy* (T-AH-19) [RIGHT] and USNS *Comfort* (T-AH-20). [BELOW] Modern descendants of a proud lineage, their primary mission is to provide emergency



on-site care for US combatant forces deployed in war or other operations. The ships' secondary mission is to provide full hospital services to support US disaster relief and humanitarian operations worldwide.

Both ship contain twelve



fully equipped operating rooms, a 1000-bed hospital facility, digital radiological services, a medical laboratory, a pharmacy, an optometry lab, an intensive care ward, dental services, a CT scanner, a morgue, and two oxygen-producing plants. Each ship is equipped with a helicopter deck capable of landing large military helicopters. The ships also have side ports to take on patients at sea.

The ships are converted *San Clemente-class* supertankers. *Mercy* was delivered in 1986 and *Comfort* in 1987. Normally, the ships are kept in a reduced operating status in Baltimore, Maryland, and San Diego, California, by a small crew of civil service mariners and active-duty Navy medical and support personnel. Each ship can be fully activated and crewed within five days.

